The White House Neighborhood

THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

INTRODUCTION

The construction of the White House prompted the growth of the surrounding area into a vibrant neighborhood for the president and the American people. Today, Lafayette Square sits to the north of the White House and serves as a public park. Visitors come to catch a glimpse of the White House through the gates and encounter statues commemorating America's past amidst a lush green park. Lafayette Square is bordered by a variety of townhouses and structures, some dating back to the early 1800s. Learn more about the history of Lafayette Square, the origins of the buildings within it, and First Lady Jaqueline Kennedy's preservation efforts.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

The President's Neighborhood

Image 1. An 1857 view of the White House neighborhood with proposed government buildings to the east and west.

Since construction began in 1792, the White House has drawn people to the president's neighborhood, pictured in **Image 1** to the left. What is now Lafayette Square was part of the grounds of the White House until Thomas Jefferson, disagreeing with its massive proportions, ordered Pennsylvania Avenue cut in front of the White House and scale down the size of the property. This change separated the private White House from the public park. Given its proximity to the White House, people have long used Lafayette Square as a place of public demonstration and celebration. View **Image 2**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of families campaigning in front of the White House in 1922, during President Warren G. Harding's administration.

St. John's Church

St. John's Church in Lafayette Square is older than all the other buildings in the park, except for the White House. Refer to **Image 3**, in the chart below, to see an image of St. John's Church. The church

was built in 1815, one year after the British burned the White House during the War of 1812. Due to its proximity to the White House, St. John's Church is often referred to as the "Church of the Presidents." The home directly next to the church, now the parish house, was frequently rented by visiting dignitaries and important officials and used to negotiate treaties. Here British diplomat Lord Ashburton and his neighbor, U.S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster, finalized the U.S.-Canadian border in 1842.

Decatur House

In 1818, Commodore Stephen Decatur, Jr. and his wife Susan built the first private home in the president's neighborhood, Decatur House, seen in **Image 4**, to the right. The Decaturs hired architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe to design a house fit for entertaining. In the 1820s, a service wing that was later used as a slave quarters was added to the house, and still exists today. Today, they are the only existing slave quarters within sight of the White House. After the Decaturs, a long line of elite renters and owners—the Gadsbys and the Beales—preserved the building as a private and prestigious home. Marie Beale bequeathed, or left, the Federal-style Decatur House to the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1956, saving the home for posterity. This home is considered a "Federal-style" home because it was built during the time the federal government system was implemented. It also has design elements consistent with other Federal-style buildings including its rectangular shape, three stories, and its use of geometric shapes—like the fan window over the front door. Today, Decatur House is the headquarters of the White House Historical Association's David M. Rubenstein National Center for White House History and is used to educate the public on the history of the White House and the surrounding neighborhood.

Image 4. The Decatur House. The Federal-style architecture of the home uses simple designs that are inspired by Ancient Greek and Roman buildings. Notice the fan (or half circle) window over the front door in this image (2013).

Cutts-Madison House

Directly across the square from Decatur House sits the Cutts-Madison House, named for its first owner, Massachusetts congressman Richard Cutts, and his sister-in-law, First Lady Dolley Madison. View **Image 5** in the chart to see a visual of the structure. Completed in 1820, Mrs. Madison resided here from 1845 until her death in 1849. When the prestigious Cosmos Club, a private social club advancing science, literature, and art, bought the residence in 1886, they joined the property to the neighboring Tayloe House—another Federal-style home on the square that was the headquarters for the National Women's Party from 1916-1917 as they fought for women's right to vote.

Blair House

Another historic property is the Blair House, pictured in **Image 6**, to the right. Named for newspaperman and presidential advisor Francis Preston Blair, the house is located on Pennsylvania Avenue diagonal from the White House. Blair purchased the house from the estate of the first Surgeon General of the U.S. Army in 1837. During World War II, the U.S. Department of State—the office of government responsible for foreign relations—bought Blair House and made it the president's official guest house to accommodate the significant increase in diplomatic visits. This purchase, which included the Blair family's furnishings, ensured the preservation of the home's original character. Although Blair House is primarily used for visiting heads of state, President Harry Truman and his family resided here during critical White House renovations from 1948 to 1952.

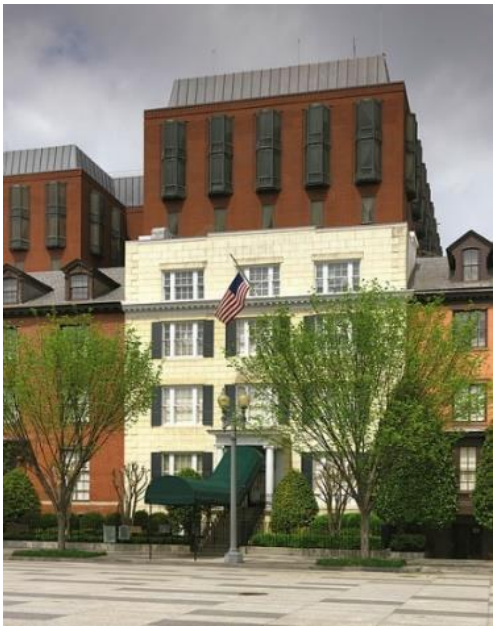


Image 6. Blair House on Pennsylvania Avenue (2013).

The U.S. Treasury Building

The U.S. Treasury is one of the capital's oldest federal office buildings and sits on the east side of the White House. Following the loss of the first two Treasury buildings to fires, a 33-year period of

construction and expansion began in 1836 and resulted in today's structure, seen in **Image 7** in the chart below. In front of the Treasury Building on Pennsylvania Avenue is a statue of Albert Gallatin, the fourth and longest serving secretary of the treasury.

Eisenhower Executive Office Building

To the west of the White House is the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, commonly called the EEOB. Built between 1871 and 1888, the building's size and unique architecture demonstrates the growth of the U.S. government, in both size and power, after the Civil War. See the large EEOB in **Image 8**, in the chart, and consider how it compares to the other smaller buildings in the neighborhood. The building originally housed the State, War, and Navy Departments. By 1949, however, these departments were replaced by offices for staff in the Office of the President. Since then, several executive agencies have resided here, as have the staff of the vice president.

Lafayette Park

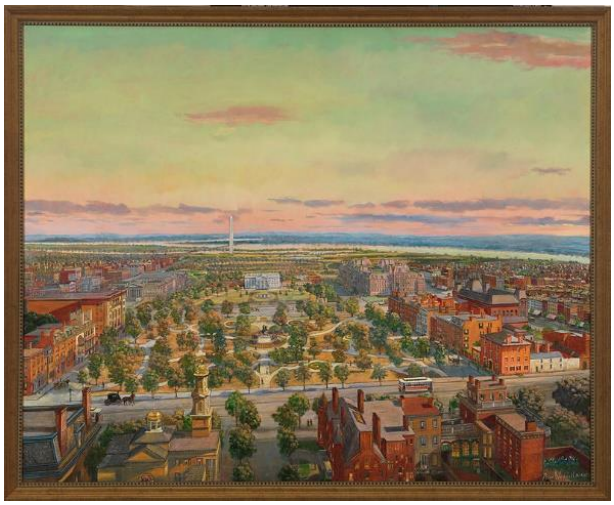


Image 9. A modern painting of how Lafayette Park and the White House neighborhood appeared in 1902 (2010).

At the center of these historic buildings is Lafayette Park, depicted in **Image 9**, to the left. The public park is named after Frenchman Marquis de Lafayette and his 1824 visit to Washington honoring his role in the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783). Operated by the National Park Service, the park's four corners feature monuments to Lafayette, seen in **Image 10** in the chart, Comte Rochambeau, General Tadeusz Kosciuszco, and Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben. All four were foreign military leaders who aided the United States during the American Revolution. At the center of the park is a fifth monument which depicts General Andrew Jackson as a victorious military hero of the War of 1812. View **Image 11**, in the chart, to see the equestrian statue of President Andrew Jackson in Lafayette Park covered in snow. When the statue was erected in 1853,

tensions that would lead to the Civil War were already mounting, and the statue was inscribed with Jackson's 1830 statement, "Our Federal Union, It Must Be Preserved."

In 1961, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy worked to block a congressional plan to replace the historic buildings in Lafayette Park with modern government offices. To preserve the historic neighborhood, she worked with architect John Carl Warnecke to develop a plan to place the modern federal offices behind the historic town homes. See Mrs. Kennedy and Mr. Warnecke working together on a scale model of the neighborhood in **Image 12** in the chart. Thanks to the efforts of Jaqueline Kennedy, architects including Warnecke, Grosvenor Chapman, and David Finley, and leadership from the Commission of Fine Arts and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the immense historical significance of the neighborhood surrounding the White House is still intact. Jaqueline Kennedy's successful mission to preserve Lafayette Square served as a model for future preservation of spaces with historical and cultural significance.

Today, the neighborhood, depicted in **Image 13** below, serves as a work environment close to the president, a space to educate the public about our nation's history, and a forum for public protests and celebrations.

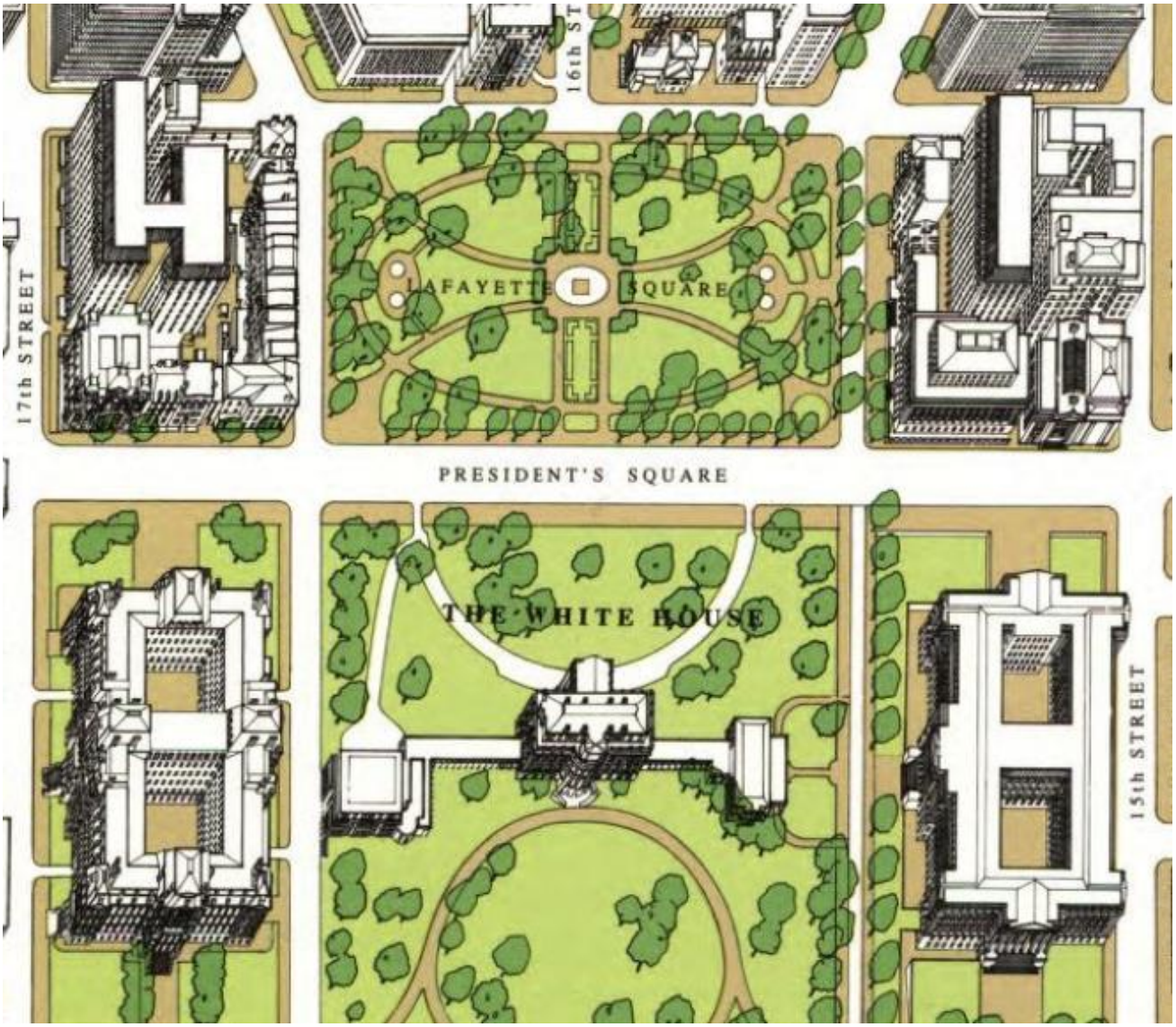


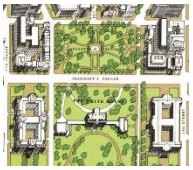
Image 13. A three-dimensional map of central Washington (1996).

IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Isometric View of the President's House	Ca. 1857	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5031-Views%20and%20Plans/Main%20Index/Plans/9656.tif.info
2	Group Appealing to President for the Release of Political Prisoners	1922	Herbert E. French	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1490.tif.info
3	St. John's Church	2016	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111505.tif.info
4	Decatur House on Jackson Place and H Street	2013	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111509.tif.info
5	Cutts-Madison House	2014	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111526.tif.info
6	Blair House	2013	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111542.tif.info

7	North Side of the U.S. Department of the Treasury	2014	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111562.tif.info
8	Eisenhower Executive Office Building	2014	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111594.tif.info
9	Depiction of 1902 Lafayette Square and White House	2010	Peter Waddell	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Views/9486.tif.info
10	Statue Honoring Marquis de Lafayette	2014	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111537.tif.info
11	Statue of Andrew Jackson Blanketed in Snow	2009	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5025-Premium%20Images/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111635.tif.info
12	Jacqueline Kennedy Inspects Lafayette Square Plans	Ca. 1961-1963	Robert Knudsen	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/9217.tif.info

13	Three-dimensional map of central Washington	1996	Joseph Passonneau and Partners	Library of Congress		https://www.loc.gov/item/96686223/

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles

- "Notable Prominent Neighbors: Personalities of St. John's Church" by Richard F. Grimmett for the White House Historical Association. Click here.
- "Good Neighbors: FDR, Major Gist, and Blair House" by Candace S. Shireman for the White House Historical Association. Click here.

Collection

- "The President's Neighborhood" by the White House Historical Association. Click here.

Map

- National Park Services interactive map of President's Park. Click here.

Podcast

- "The White House 1600 Sessions: Researching Slavery in the President's Neighborhood" by the White House Historical Association. Listen here.

Research Initiative

- "Slavery in the President's Neighborhood" by the White House Historical Association. Click here.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- Make your own model of Lafayette Square's historic houses with paper bags with the White House Historical Association's "Build Your Own Paper Bag Neighborhood" Anywhere Activity. Click here.

For older learners:

- What are the historic buildings in your city? Do you have a local preservation or historical society? Contact them to learn more about your neighborhood and city or town. Draw a map showing what you learned. What historical stories can be told by the buildings in your map?
- First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy was committed in her efforts to preserve the character of the White House neighborhood but working with historic buildings can present difficulties for modern day government employees. Write a journal entry reflecting on the balance between honoring the buildings of the past and providing comfort to those who occupy these structures today. Consider, what do modern buildings have that historic ones don't? What do historic buildings offer that modern ones don't?

For younger learners:

- Read *Walking in the City with Jane: A Story of Jane Jacobs* by Susan Hughes. Think about the ways Jane Jacobs worked to save and preserve spaces in New York City. How is that similar to the work First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy did? How is it different?
- Now that you've learned about the different structures in the President's Neighborhood, think about which building you would like to stay in if you were visiting the White House for a weekend. Which building would you like to stay in? Why? Write at least two paragraphs to explain your answer.